

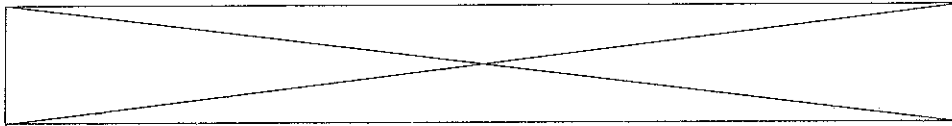
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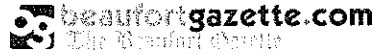
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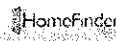
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Too fat to fight: Generals call obesity a threat to national defense

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A group of more than 50 retired generals and admirals says a growing number of young Americans are too fat to fight

A study released last week by Mission: Readiness, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit organization, found that 27 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds are too overweight to join the military and that fatty school lunches and junk food are to blame.

"Today, otherwise excellent recruiting prospects, some of them with generations of sterling military service in their family history, are being turned away because they are just too overweight," according to the study. "Our standards are high because we clearly cannot have people in our command who are not up to the job. Too many lives depend on it."

Col. Michael Bowersox, assistant chief of staff for recruiting for the Corps Eastern Recruiting Region, said he shares the group's concerns about childhood obesity but said it has had little effect on the Corps' recruiting goals.

"As an officer on recruiting duty it concerns me that today's youth have become much more sedentary than my generation," said Bowersox, who is stationed at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island. "It amazes me how many young men are out there that cannot accomplish even one pull-up. But we need such a small percentage of military-aged men and women to fill our ranks that there is no cause for alarm. Basically, if an applicant (or) recruit doesn't meet our standards, then we simply do not enlist them."

Bowersox said recruits are expected to meet the same height, weight and body-fat requirements as other Marines.

The Marine Corps and the other branches of the military have had little difficulty recruiting able-bodied young people despite the near certainty they will go to war. For the first time since the draft ended in 1973, all four active-duty services and all six reserve forces achieved their recruiting goals last year, a fact widely attributed to the ailing economy and record unemployment.

Mission: Readiness said the weight problem could be combated with sweeping child nutrition legislation to improve school lunches.

A spokeswoman for U.S. Rep. Joe Wilson, R-S.C., called the report's findings "reasonable and respectable" but disagreed with the need for congressional intervention.

"Congressman Wilson is concerned about the lack of exercise and lack of nutritional choices in schools (but) does not believe a national mandate is the most effective solution to America's obesity problem," said Pepper Pennington, Wilson spokeswoman. "Local school boards (need) to develop nutritional programs that best fit the needs of their schoolchildren."

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